

Denison Journal of Religion

Volume 5

Article 2

2005

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Recommended Citation

Wise, Rachel (2005) "Reclaiming Religious Symbols in a Secular World: Ritual and Uniting the Faith Community Within the Prophetic Tradition," *Denison Journal of Religion*: Vol. 5 , Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.denison.edu/religion/vol5/iss1/2>

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Reclaiming Religious Symbols in a Secular World: Ritual and Uniting the Faith Community Within the Prophetic Tradition

Rachel Wise

An Oliver McTernan quote from *Violence in God's Name* speaks powerfully of the fear occupying the minds of theologians today:

The “secularization thesis” that dominates today’s political thinking is based on the premise that the decline in religion is an irreversible process . . . Religion lingers as a comforting myth providing support in times of personal crisis but in effect, they agree, it has been relegated from “the mainstream to the back waters” and it has ceased to have an impact on the social or political (or economic) life of modern society (23).

It begs the question, has secularization “taken over?” In a secular world can and does religion speak to the economic, political, and social realities of our time? The impact of secularity on religion cannot be denied. To answer the above question, it is necessary to explore the implications of the orthodox and progressive Christian reactions to secularization, how they have informed modern religious expression, and how they might contribute to its future revitalization. We will also explore the ways in which a revitalized ritual life might help reclaim the symbols of the faith and enlarge their meaning in such a way that religion can again critique the present order and its oppressive power structures. So while mainstream Christianity is largely relegated to the private sphere, religion may, in fact, be wrenched from the clutches of America’s imperial ideology, or civil religion, and again serve a biblical prophetic function.

In *The Sacred Canopy*, Peter Berger discusses the impact of secularization on religion. He defines the “sacred canopy” as an umbrella of sorts which covers all spheres and facets of society, be they personal, private, economic, political,

or social. The canopy informs and judges the rightness of that which it covers, constructing a version of reality that is taken for granted and into which successive generations are socialized. Religion once claimed this position. Now secularization has created a radically contracted sacred canopy. In this new world, religion's influence has come to lie primarily in the private sphere, crippling its ability to speak to and evaluate other spheres in society. With the advent of things like industrialization, Enlightenment science, and space travel, we can now fathom a world that operates apart from any governing hand. As Berger articulates, religion can no longer count on being accepted or operational in our society. And in a nation of growing pluralism, the impact of the church is increasingly complicated. Multiple truths, methodologies, and religions compete to define reality. The Christian church no longer has a clear monopoly in defining the Western world.

As Donald W. Shriver discovered in his case-study of religion in the mill town of Gastonia, secularization has caused within our society a radical sense of differentiation. In our differentiated society, "pockets" or spheres of the economic, political, religious, and so on are no longer seen as overlapping or as in some way connected to one another. Religion, which once connoted a "binding together," is no longer able to do its binding. This is problematic for Schriver who believes Christianity should function as that "which makes the strongest intrinsic claim to the right to be the evaluator of the rest of culture" (46), calling for justice in all spheres of life. Under this model, religion ought to be that thing which recognizes that the social victimization of an individual is intimately connected with the spiritual/personal sphere. It is that which should refuse the dominate culture's binary of the body and soul/mind/heart, instead seeing the one as intimately connected to the reality of the other. This religious "binding up" claims its right to evaluate all spheres of culture and sees the biblical tradition as having relevancy in public, private, social, political, economic, and personal situations alike. Yet dominate Christianity today fails to act as Berger's "sacred canopy." Religion has ceased to be that which, when authentically experienced, cannot be co-opted or subjugated by dominant social, political, and economic ideologies. The ability to critique society is one that the religious community has seemingly relinquished. How has this come to pass?

Secularization has required us to reposition ourselves in a newly differentiated world. As such, there has been two main reactions within the faith community. James Hunter in *Culture Wars* illustrates the two ways we might classify religious peoples today. The orthodox Christian sees secularization as the reason

for a perceived moral decay within society. They believe in an ultimate, transcendent code of moral values, maintaining that truth is unchanging and we have only to invoke the biblical text for a resolution to any seemingly morally complex situation. Theology is an absolute, once-and-for-all phenomenon. Orthodox Christians have therefore become the guardians of what we call conservative values.

In contrast, the progressive Christian does not see secular knowledge as somehow evil. They believe that moral authority should evolve in light of the knowledge (be it scientific, social, etc.) a society has at a given historical moment. They embrace the zeitgeist and culture of their time. This does not mean that the faith tradition is abandoned. Rather, the progressive Christian participates in what Paul Tillich calls "the method of correlation" in *Systematic Theology*. As an existential theologian, he argues that theology done correctly arises from correlating the biblical faith with our unique experiences and social location. The method of correlation requires theology to oscillate between the poles of the question implied by the times and the eternal message. In this way, theology is always relevant and functional, while still true to the eternal message. Theologians like Jürgen Moltmann, Douglas Meeks, and James Cone have contributed to the continuing authenticity of the Christian tradition through metaphors for God that speak uniquely to our modern condition while still being rooted in the biblical faith. They have left us with "the God of Hope," "God the Economist," and "God of the Oppressed," metaphors that allow believers to again fathom a God who is intimately interested in "secular" politics, economics, and liberation movements.

As Hunter goes on to discuss, the two groups represent fundamentally different moral visions as they struggle to define reality through religious symbols and language. The orthodox is characterized by what Berger would call the world-maintaining element of religion. It calls for order, tradition, and certainty in staving off the precariousness of present reality. For as Berger discusses, everything is a social construct that hasn't always been in existence and can therefore be changed. Conversely, the progressive is characterized by the world-shaking element. It acknowledges that the present reality is a precarious world-construction and uses religion in a dynamic and critiquing way. The two viewpoints might seem irreconcilable, but what is truly interesting about this phenomenon is that both the progressive and orthodox claim the Jesus event and the Biblical faith. They are both committed to the religious tradition, and it is from this fidelity that their theological and social efforts arise. Perhaps there is more in common between the two than the media is willing to allow, than even the faith community

itself has been led to believe.

So how are they figured in such radically different ways? There is an antagonism within faith communities themselves which the media has only managed to augment. As Jim Wallis discusses in his book, *Who Speaks For God?*, the media reinforces the polarization of the religious community by giving the public two options when approaching the topic of faith: 1) the Religious Right's fidelity to the biblical text and a (presumably) subsequent bigotry; and, 2) a benign liberalism not rooted in the faith tradition and therefore seen as in some way inauthentic. Indeed, when Wallis asked people to describe Christians, they replied with words like "antifeminist," "antigay," "antipoor," "antienviromental," and so forth (10). Surely many of us would not describe ourselves as such, but "Christian" in public discourse has largely become synonymous with conservative politics. And "conservative" has largely become synonymous with patriotism and good citizenry.

This linking of the religious and the political may seem curious. Perhaps it also speaks to the discrepancy between the words used to describe Christians and those Wallis found were used to describe Jesus: "compassionate," "loving," caring," "friend of the poor and outcast," and so forth (10). The "anti" words used to describe the public's view of Christianity suggests that its message is seen as more ideological than evangelical. Somehow Christians are not seen as taking part in preaching the good news [the evangel] to the poor as Isaiah did, as Jesus is seen as doing. Rather we seem, in the media, to have an agenda, and a distinctly political one at that.

Might this suggest that the severing of the world-shaking from the world-maintaining element of religion has allowed a perversion of the faith tradition to take place? This is to say that the certainty, absoluteness, and consequent authority that characterizes the orthodox viewpoint hooks present reality up with the ultimate reality that is God and may therefore serve as a powerful legitimator of the status quo. Such legitimation is inexhaustibly attractive to those in and desiring power. It is no coincidence that "Christian" is being currently being linked with "conservative" in political discourse. Our government has co-opted the language and symbols of the faith for purposes that are not integrally related to their meaning within the Biblical context. This phenomenon is what Robert Bellah calls "civil religion" in his book, *The Broken Covenant*. Civil religion requires that such symbols and language be disassociated from their original contexts. The emptier they are of meaning and the less they are rooted in a historical tradition, the easier they can be used for legitimating purposes while still retaining

the authority their original meanings afforded them.

In this way, civil religion continues to act back on the religious tradition that birthed its mode of expression. One could further argue that it has since usurped the biblical tradition within mainstream Christianity. It's likely that we have all sang "The Star-Spangled Banner" in church on the Fourth of July. Few flinch when presidents say, "God Bless (specifically and only) America." Civil religion uses the symbols of the faith to legitimate the power structures it upholds and the reality it creates for its citizens. As Bellah observes, the God of civil religion is designed for order. Walter Brueggemann convincingly argues in his book, *The Prophetic Imagination* that this God has become like the gods of the Pharaohs—endorsing an order that is made to seem natural and unchangeable. Such a religion can never be disinterested but will inevitably serve the interests of those in charge, those who benefit from the present order. Civil religion represents a static and controlled religion which, in effect, makes God's sovereignty subordinate to the agenda of our nation. Thus civil religion makes God so present in the regime and dominant consciousness that there is little chance of religion serving a prophetic "over-againstness" function (30).

As Shriver witnessed in Gastonia, religion has become the servant of our nation's dominant consciousness. Shriver defines this as ideology: organizing beliefs and reality based on "concrete vested interests" (45). Ideology is defined by the powerful. Only when linked with power can ideology make the claim that the reality it creates is natural or ultimate. In symbiosis with our civil religion, society's ideological interests are fleshed out in religious terms. If we take a look at November's elections, those issues that brought the Christian community out in force focused on abortion and homosexuality. And as Kelly Brown Douglas discusses in her book, *Sexuality and the Black Church*, to control a population's sexuality is to effectively control that population. At the same time, the poor were decidedly not an issue. Christians were said to vote on issues of "morality," while remaining strangely silent on issues like poverty. Here we clearly see the ideological separation of the public and private spheres that so characterizes America's civil religion. Religion is allowed to speak on issues that concern personal morality but not on systematic oppression. Religion is not able to speak to "social" issues like poverty. It is unable to see economic exploitation as a "moral" issue. Our nation's ideology allows for the private addressing of the poor's suffering through charity, and there is a reason that the government gives tax deductions for such contributions. Charity does not challenge the system that says the poor are a normal part of a wealthy capitalistic society. Our nation's

ideology denies religion the language to challenge a system of oppression. As Brueggemann so sharply puts it, "Personal piety has become an end in itself instead of the energy for social justice. Religious language has little or no connection to moral action in society" (36).

In fact, the issue of the poor illuminates religion's larger co-option in many ways. Many Christians, if asked what "the poor shall inherit the earth" might mean for our action in the world, would reply that Christians need to be humble, unselfish, and willing to give up everything to follow God's call. All very good things. But this also represents the way in which Jesus is spiritualized in our culture. He is dehistoricized so that his life, teachings, and the historical context of his life and death are strangely missing. When asked if Christ's words about feeding the poor should mean something profound about how we live our lives, the focus would likely shift to how much more important it is to save souls, to give the lost food for eternity.

We must question the extent to which such an attitude is biblical. It rather seems to serve the ideological purposes of the economic power structures in this country. Jesus healed and taught. The two went hand-in-hand. There existed no neoplatonic binary that allows us to ignore the body in favor of the soul. The integrity of one was intimately linked to the other. That Jesus was radically embodied shows the spiritual and physical are united to the point that the body itself is divine. It is perhaps in issues of the body that our national ideology has most deceived us. For the biblical story goes against the agenda of what Mark Lewis Taylor has identified in *The Executed God* as an imperial Pax-Americana. As an economic world power, America has become an exploiter, violating the sovereignty of bodies and countries alike. Empire necessarily sees the body as an expendable resource only useful insofar as it furthers empire's expansion.

It is critique against this practice that empire must silence, making its citizen sure that the status quo, imperially constructed reality is natural. Civil religion has effectively done so by co-opting religious symbols and language. For example, Easter is a national holiday. We are encouraged both in and out of sanctuary to see Jesus' death as divinely ordained and benignly sacrificial. To wear a cross as an adornment is to proclaim your personal salvation. Even the cross is co-opted, taken from its context so that it is no longer a political statement that proclaims the resurrection of the Christ executed because he went head-to-head with a religious and political establishment that exploited the masses. That Jesus conquered death could mean for us that he called into question the ultimacy and legitimacy claimed by the Roman Empire. By and large, the cru-

cifixion and resurrection no longer serve such a prophetic function, no longer critic the power structures that control our daily lives. Now we have pastors who tell their congregation that the godly candidate to vote for is so-and-so. By-and-large, mainstream Christianity only serves to endorse the economic and political agenda of Pax-Americana.

This is not to say that orthodox Christianity or those who adhere to it are in anyway evil but that its unchanging sense of truth and divine revelation makes it particularly susceptible to cooption. It can serve as a particularly potent legitimater of the status quo. Because orthodox Christians believe in an absolute, once-an-for-all theology, there is the sense that God has already revealed himself entirely. Anything differing from our traditional theological and social stances must then represent untruth. Acquired knowledge—be it political, social, or anthropological—has no bearing on the eternal message. Those in power are only too eager to link their oppressive structures up with the ultimate. In this way they may take on the character of that which was, is, and will be, as that which is natural and ordained by God. Thus we have seen the language of politics and religion merge. We speak of national missions. We picture God as a capitalist making decisions based on net gains, willing to sacrifice the few for the many.

As Brueggemann argues, this leaves a mainstream church that is so enculturated that it retains little power to think or act prophetically, as that which has the strongest intrinsic claim to evaluate the rest of culture. “Our consciousness has been claimed by false fields of perception and idolatrous systems of language and rhetoric” (1). So confiscated have the language and symbols of the faith become that mainstream Christianity has slowly abandoned the faith tradition—all without the realization that civil religion has come to dominate religious discourse. Many religious peoples “care intensely about God, but uncritically, so that the God of well-being and good order is not understood to be precisely the source of social oppression” (8). It is a phenomenon Taylor argues is uniquely American as our economic, political, and cultural empire expands. Pax-Americana has successfully muffled the cries of the marginalized and convinced us that order is good, that order is God. Through the domination of a civil religion that subordinates religion to ideology, the Christian community has been made to internalize the version of reality presented by the American empire. Little externalization by the religious community occurs. So the status quo remains largely unchallenged by new models of reality born of a group collectively imagining and willing into existence the future promised by a faithful God.

For relatively obvious reasons the world-shaking element of progressive

Christianity is less attractive to those in power. It doesn't lend itself to co-opting in the same way, and is not as sought after as a legitimator because its sense of truth and God is unfolding. This makes the progressive viewpoint more likely to critique empire's claims to be the sole creator of reality. It lends itself to Jürgen Moltmann's *Theology of Hope*. Moltmann argues that God can never be known in his entirety; that God is always in the state of becoming, that he in part reveals himself in revelation but never epiphany. This disallows a faith that falls into the present order, a god that can be co-opted to endorse something like the Iraq war. We can only know God in the historical sense, in the ways in which he has faithfully met, in part, and enlarged his promise of a liberated, inclusive future. In this sense, everything must be set in the key of eschatology, as that which does not just hope for heaven, but in knowing that such an end is an inevitability sees the world's transformation to that end as realistic.

Ironically the very qualities that might allow the progressive Christian to critique the present order have simultaneously made the symbols of the faith difficult to access as they have been removed by civil religion to legitimate the present order. Furthermore, all of this is not to say that progressive Christians are immune from the effects of civil religion. We are all recovering children of civil religion and imperial ideology. The question is, how do we overcome it? How do we free our minds and tongues so that we might experience a faith that is authentically free from the externalizations of the empire? How do we overcome a popular view of Christianity that encourages its internal polarization? In a secularized world, we can't afford to be divided. We must begin to reclaim the symbols and language of the faith and reattach them to their historical context. Only then can religion reclaim its prophetic function as that which critiques the status quo and by its very nature cannot be co-opted.

For this, the church is in desperate need of resacralization and ritual. Unfortunately, as Tom Driver reflects in his book, *Liberating Rites*, the religious community is characterized by ritual boredom. Civil religion has successfully distanced us from the meanings of our religious rituals in favor of its own agenda. The church has also struggled with seeing how rituals might pertain to the world as a result of an ideology that relegates religion to the private sphere. And so our rituals have grown empty and meaningless, a matter of habit. Or rituals like the Eucharist have been given benign significance like that of a fellowship meal.

Yet is through ritual that we might stop internalizing empire's version of reality and start externalizing our hope for the just future promised all of God's children, all of God's creation. It is within this liminal space, between the pres-

ent order and the “as if,” that Christianity might begin to reclaim its symbols and language from civil religion. For ritual evokes both. Here we might explore their meaning by reattaching them to their original context. In this way we might open up their meanings beyond the narrow way that American’s imperial ideology has defined them. We have to know what a ritual like the Eucharist meant before we can know what it means today. In taking the body and blood of Jesus into ourselves, we might explore the radical implications of claiming a Savior whose body was broken by an imperial power because he challenged the ultimacy of a powerful civic and religious establishment. To wear the cross and take the Eucharist could then be politically charged actions. Ritual might again engage in what Taylor calls “the theatrics of counter terror” by evoking the memory of the crucifixion and resurrection—an event in which the tools of empire came to symbolize its defeat at the hands of the alternative reality God offers, which is one of freedom from even state-sponsored death. This is just one of the ways that symbols and language, emptied by civil religion, can again be rooted concretely in the biblical tradition.

In ritual the body is seen as integral, for ritual is action. In this way it becomes clear the extent to which we “do” theology. Here the body and mind are revealed as intimately connected. And it is to ritual that we may come emotionally, spiritually, and physically victimized by the structures that socialized us. Our ritual may be akin to acting out and telling our story as it parallels the biblical story. Our experiences of economic, racial, sexual, and gender oppression might be claimed by the event we remember in the Eucharist: the Israelites’ Exodus from imperial Egypt and the execution of a Savior who loved and affirmed the marginalized while he called into question the authority of the powerful. And where we ourselves are not experiencing oppression, we might stand in solidarity with those who are experiencing it through the corporate acting of religious ritual. As Brueggemann notes, “Bringing hurt to public expression is an important first step in the dismantling criticism that permits a new reality, theological and social, to emerge” (12).

Thus, it is in ritual that we might engage Brueggemann’s “prophetic imagination.” In the liminal space that ritual provides, we are momentarily liberated from the reality empire has lain before us. We become free to evoke, form, and reform an alternate community. It is a community that must be imagined before it can be implemented. It is ritual that will help us to bring the hope to articulation for which there currently is no public arena. If it can be imagined, it can be lived. It is here that we experience Moltmann’s theology of hope, here that we

might find the courage to live the future in the present. And “hope is the refusal to accept the reading of reality which is the majority opinion” (65). In the ritual space, compassion can take hurt seriously and reveal it to be unacceptable and unnatural. In this compassion the religious community might most poignantly critique the numbness empire requires of its subjects, the deaf ear it asks us to turn to the cries of the exploited. In this we might internalize the pain of the marginalized, affirm it and externalize a transformed reality. In this we might affirm the humanity of those seen as expendable, as sacrificial elements along empire’s path of domination. We might affirm the body as divine.

Ritual confronts empire’s violence and disembodiment power with another kind of power. Ritual reveals power to be relational. It opens up the currently very narrow meaning of terms like being “born again.” To be “born again” may be seen as a rebirth into a radically alternative community. Reclaiming the faith tradition will force us to give up what Taylor calls “the God of respectability.” For our Jesus was uncredentialed, unknown, and unwelcomed. Reclaiming this reality in the liminal ritual space necessarily unites what we come to confess as individuals and faith communities with our action in the world. For as Driver explains, rituals are by their very nature efficacious. They bring into being the future for which we hope.

It is through ritual that we might resoundingly answer secularization by reclaiming religion’s relevancy and authority in the spheres of the world. In this liminal space religion might expand and reclaim its status as “the sacred canopy.” Ritual reveals the extent to which, as Moltmann said in *The Coming of God*, “Theology is a community affair. Consequently theological truth takes the form of dialogue, and does so essentially.” Ritual as a communal act connects us one to the other, expressing and creating a community. As a shared experience, it is a social process, one that shapes a community and sets moral limits. It is in ritual that we see the life-affirming unification of the world-shaking and world-maintaining elements of religion. Perhaps in ritual it is revealed that the orthodox and progressive viewpoints now entertained are really concerned with one and the same things. And if we take Jesus’ life, execution, and resurrection seriously, perhaps to be an orthodox Christian is to be a progressive in the world. In any case, however the two are figured, ritual might allow for both to be seen as authentic expressions of the biblical faith. And in creating a real and autonomous dialectic, we might guard against a political system that seeks to use the symbols of the faith for its own continued power, as well as the temptation to ally ourselves with the powerful in exchange for guaranteed survival (however

inauthentically) in a secular world.

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